

Situational Analysis

A Framework for Evidence-Based Practice

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ABSTRACT Situational analysis is a framework for professional practice and research in educational psychology. The process is guided by a set of practice principles requiring that psychologists' work is evidence-based, ecological, collaborative and constructive. The framework is designed to provide direction for psychologists who wish to tailor their fieldwork to the diverse situations in which they work. Situational analysis supports psychologists to recognize and work with diversity in the educational community at individual and systems levels and to undertake research projects. The open and collaborative, rather than prescriptive, consultation process supports the development of unique solutions for particular situations. It checks that interventions are built on the supportive features of referral situations. The framework has two aspects, *style*, the particular theoretical orientation and *structure*, the problem-solving method used to track information through from referral to intervention. The framework guides psychologists to focus their projects and determine the salient dimensions of referral situations. It invites them to propose evidence-supported relationships between the dimensions for the purpose of determining the most constructive interventions. Psychologists are encouraged to prepare to use this flexible framework through the acquisition of a broad range of educational, psychological and professional knowledge.

Introduction

This article outlines *Situational Analysis*, a framework for professional practice and research in educational psychology. Situational analysis entails a systematic investigation of complex problems or issues

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impacting on individuals and systems. Essentially ecosystemic in form, situational analysis offers a method for working that is evidenced-based and well suited to an ecological perspective on professional practice.

Several features distinguish this approach: (1) collaborative, evidenced-based decision-making throughout the consultation process; (2) recognition and valuing of the multiple perspectives of participants in any given situation; (3) acknowledgement of the social construction of knowledge and understanding; (4) identification of elements of new solutions in existing situations; (5) recognition of the interaction between people and the multi-systems of their lives; (6) appreciation of the dynamic nature of human performance and (7) systematic application of a problem analysis procedure.

Situational analysis supports psychologists to render difficult situations more manageable through reduction of their complexity. Used to examine the ecology surrounding individual students or whole school systems, situational analysis helps psychologists develop a clear sense of direction in practice, encourages authentic engagement of people who know the world in various ways and provides a tool to ensure that practice is guided by legitimate knowledge or 'evidence'. The framework ensures that practice has the 'evidence-based designation' recently called for by Kratochwill and Shernoff (2004) who argued that intervention must reflect demonstrated efficacy in the specified contexts in which it occurs. Situational analysis allows for the integration of evidence-based practice with the ways of knowing of field participants and allows interventions to be developed not by participants on their own, but by the collective knowledge of participants, including psychologists, who access the domain of knowledge of their profession.

The evidence-base is primarily located in the actions that guide the development of understanding and secondly in the interventions designed to address presenting issues. Situational analysis does not involve application of 'off the peg' interventions, but those that reflect theory and research in educational psychology in conjunction with socio-cultural understandings applicable to specific contexts. Determining applicability of interventions is not simply a case of attempting to match contexts in which programmes have previously been successfully applied, but designing interventions with regard for psychological theory and research in the light of knowledge of the particular circumstances. To carry out such practice, psychologists must be well prepared. They must be able to access and apply a broad range of knowledge provided by current and well-grounded research while simultaneously considering the perspectives of those regularly involved in referral situations.

Situational analysis has two main components, *style* and *structure*. 'Style' refers to the *way* in which actions are undertaken and reflects

the particular theoretical position taken in the ascription of meaning and the construction of new solutions. 'Structure' denotes the steps taken by practitioners to gather, analyse and use information in the problem-solving process.

An important function of situational analysis is to engender collaboration between colleagues, members of different disciplines or agencies, families and students. Situational analysis, supported by strong and legitimate evidence at every point of the process, supports multi-person fieldwork that involves the integration of large amounts of information reflecting the many views taken by participants on complex situations. In many referral situations, educational psychologists work alongside people from other disciplines who share in the construction of analyses. Through working with others to construct more acceptable solutions, they assist in the facilitation of a shared problem-solving process. Situational analysis involves the identification and integration of salient factors in referral situations. This integration is represented as a proposition regarding the dynamic relationships between the most influential factors and serves the purpose of directing the construction of new solutions. The proposition indicates circular causal relationships rather than truths.

Background to situational analysis

Methods of practice do not spontaneously arise, but emerge from the history and culture of the social group who use them. Current professional practice reflects remnants of past approaches and the ever-changing socio-cultural environment of practice. Today, educational psychology takes ecological approaches to referrals, situating their practice within the dynamic social systems in which behaviour occurs (Ryba et al., 2001; Sheridan and Gutkin, 2000). Understandings for observed events are developed with regard to both the proximal and distal contexts of action.

Contextual variables, once viewed as irrelevant, unhelpful or confounding, are essential elements in the construction of meaning for and management of situations. Recognition of contextualized understandings does not imply that scientific enquiry is not important or cannot be authentically conducted. On the contrary, contemporary approaches to research, such as those developed from the constructivist viewpoint, simply require that a new range of questions be asked (Gergen, 2001; 2002). Contextualized practice offers an enriched view of science rather than an attack on science (Potter, 2002). Psychologists continue to apply principles of the scientific method in their practice, although their work is increasingly situated in the referral environment. Useful tools have been taken from the scientific era but they are no longer

used to create decontextualized understandings or applied to the detection and measurement of deficit. For example, psychologists work in ways that minimize unhelpful practitioner bias and prejudice, but these goals are not met through the isolation of a narrow range of variables. New methods of practice recognize benefits of practitioner alignment with participants and address any unhelpful elements of bias and prejudice by increasing the input of those involved in referral situations on an everyday basis, thus broadening the range of variables considered.

Understanding of situations involves the integration of many different forms of information. The ecological view implies that the world is interpreted by each member through individual and subjective but socially constructed perspectives. The total ecology includes social, physical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects and therefore requires use of a multi-method approach to ask and answer the questions presenting. Some factors are more amenable to description, observation and quantification than others but all contribute to human experience. Accordingly, psychologists are now encouraged to integrate social constructivist and traditional scientific approaches (McCaslin and Hickey, 2001; Rosiek, 2003).

Ecological approaches to educational psychology

The ecological approach on which situational analysis is based assumes a socio-historical perspective on human development and encompasses the contributions of many theorists. Those whose views have contributed to this contextualized conceptualization of human interaction relevant to the domain of educational psychology include Urie Bronfenbrenner, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey. Bronfenbrenner's clearly articulated ecological model of human development represents forgotten, or previously disregarded, aspects of children's interaction with the world, a multi-layered socio-cultural milieu. Both Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky considered human development to occur within the social relations among people. This stance is consistent with the position taken by John Dewey, who contended that individuals' actions are affected by the whole situation in which they are involved and that people interact with one another to form the whole (Dewey, 1938). In effect, ecological theory has functioned as a catalyst for a massive change in direction for educational psychology (Sheridan and Gutkin, 2000). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development, and its representation of reciprocal human interaction outlined in the following section, is fundamental to situational analysis.

Multi-systemic analysis

Educational psychology has readily accepted Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. Situational analysis is based on an interpretation of the ecological perspective as one that recognizes the influence of environmental factors both internal and external to the individual. Bronfenbrenner portrays the total environment or ecosystem as a set of nested structures or layers bound together by the interaction between them. The *microsystem* refers to the immediate settings in which a person lives; the *mesosystem* refers to the relationships between the various microsystems; the *exosystem* comprises of structures or settings that might not directly link with the developing person but nonetheless, influences their life; and the *macrosystem* refers to the culture in which the individual lives. In addition to the layers described by Bronfenbrenner (1979), situational analysis also considers a *self-system*, placed at the core of the learning context. Inclusion of the internal context of the learner recognizes the active role that this person plays in the co-construction of knowledge through interaction within the total environment. The self-system refers to the person's developing cognitive, metacognitive and emotional processes that impact on their learning and functioning in life circumstances. Bronfenbrenner (1986) has also identified the *chronosystem*, the environment's temporal dimension that produces varying interpretations of events in different eras and at different periods throughout the lifespan. The dimension has been omitted here as it is implied in the interactive, dynamic and transformational functioning of the entire ecosystem.

Development is influenced by events occurring at all levels. Bronfenbrenner encourages researchers to look beyond single settings and explore the interaction between settings. Interactions between the levels, and between settings within levels, are potentially as powerful as the events occurring in the immediate settings of the developing person. Differences in behaviour of people within similar settings are explained through examination of the various meanings they ascribe to settings, their perspectives on the settings being influenced by their social and cultural background and their lived experience. Individuals do not remain passive in the process of development but engage with the surrounding world to co-determine their positions. Observed differences in behaviour by people across settings expose the improbability of researchers obtaining understanding of human development in a clinical laboratory. Ecological practice is, therefore, situated in the everyday lives of developing people.

Individual realities and social connections

The ecological approach to understanding human development rests on the premise 'that what matters for behaviour and development is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in objective reality' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p4). Development reflects, and is, the way people perceive and deal with their unique environments. Each person brings to particular situations their social and cultural histories that serve to filter their perception of events. In any given context, each perceives experience in a unique way. However, although perspectives of the world are unique to individuals, people do not exist in isolation, but in relation to one another and are at one time determining of and constrained by their environment. Ecological fieldwork, therefore, requires the active involvement of the developing person, the environment and significant players. It is integrally involved with the interaction between them.

As each person is an inseparable part of their social system, ecological approaches are systems oriented. Ascribing meanings to referral situations and constructing new solutions requires understanding of ecological systems or environmental influences. Both Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky have acknowledged the critical role of culture in human development. For instance, Bronfenbrenner notes that settings from the same culture seem to be similar while there are clear distinctions between settings from different cultures. He observed that cultures create a 'blueprint' that determines the nature of each layer of the ecology. This blueprint, rather than being a static device, is contestable and when challenged and altered, results in changes in the actions of individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that the socio-historical aspects of culture determine the nature of pedagogical processes selected in education and the means for development of consciousness itself.

From an ecological viewpoint, development represents the systematic approach through which knowledge is acquired in relation to the social history of a given culture. Interpersonal problems encountered by individuals and groups are viewed as imbalances in social relations rather than inherent deficits of people. The process of resolution of imbalances leads to social transformation or development. Development, therefore, is the result of a dynamic set of reciprocal interactions rather than a single linear process. Support for a developing person depends on the existence and nature of social connections between settings and the experience of the situation by significant others. For instance, role demands, stresses or supports stemming from other settings all play a part in determining capability of others, such as teachers and parents, to construct supportive environments.

The identification and preservation of strong and supportive connections between people and the multiple systems of their lives are crucial in situational analysis. It is on the firm foundations created by these connections, rather than individual deficits, that interventions are constructed. The value of helpful aspects of referral situations has been demonstrated in narrative enquiry, a constructivist approach to practice that has been incorporated into the practice of a number of New Zealand psychologists (Ryba et al., 2001). Through acknowledgment and understanding of the stories in participants' lives, narrative methods offer useful strategies for recognizing the powerful implicit aspects of social systems and participants' subjective views that influence observed actions.

The solution focus of narrative enquiry supports the recognition of the stories of participants in fieldwork and encourages practitioners to identify helpful *unique outcomes* or departures from the dominant problem-saturated referral accounts (White, 1988; White and Epston, 1990). Inclusion of such measures supports the engagement of participants and ensures that interventions are secured to supportive features of the frameworks of students' everyday lives. In many respects, narrative enquiry has provided ecological psychologists, who seek to align professional perspective and action, with a tool to bridge the theory to practice gulf.

The role of participants' affective experience has been highlighted recently with the advent of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) presentation of the concept of *positive psychology*, an approach that encourages psychologists to consider and understand not only peoples' experiences and consequent actions, but also their emotions in response to their environments. Positive psychology is the study of positive subjective experience and holds that people who experience positive affect are more likely to demonstrate positive actions and interpret events in ways that allow them to ascribe positive meaning to the events they observe. Such understandings imply that in order to nurture helpful supports within educational psychology environments, these positive aspects must first be identified or created and then maintained (Chafouleas and Bray, 2004). Ecological models of practice place greater emphasis on the position of those who interact with students on a daily basis and who are instrumental in the construction of learning environments. Akin-Little and Little (2004) note the importance of considering, within the consultation process, the experience of the teacher who works indirectly with school students. Teachers who are implementing programmes are likely to benefit from experiencing positive affect in their working days with consequent benefits to students.

Application of situational analysis

Psychologists require an explicit system or framework to ensure that knowledge acquired through training and experience guides their practice and the professional judgements required in specific circumstances. Situational analysis demonstrates its evidence-based approach to practice through its dependence on legitimized theory for decision-making at every stage of the process. The requirement for explicit links to theory, research and applicable socio-cultural knowledge means that decisions made by practitioners are evidence-based throughout the process. This requirement is incorporated into situational analysis from the point at which a referral issue is raised, to the planning of the assessment process and the delineation and linking of dimensions. The construction of intervention plans based on the evidence-based analysis checks that the intervention is itself justified and applicable to the specific environment in which it is implemented. Decisions made regarding the effectiveness of interventions must also be supported by explicit evidence. In summary, an evidence-base is an inherent component of the framework. If the consultation process is not based on legitimate evidence, if it is not applicable for the social or cultural group involved, it is not a situational analysis.

The 'structure' component of situational analysis relates to the procedures undertaken in the manipulation of information in the construction of meaning. The basic problem-solving structure of situational analysis is adapted from earlier work in New Zealand by Robinson (1987). Robinson's problem analysis method is selected for its capacity to provide a systematic way of understanding complex situations. Situational analysis extends this basic framework by defining a 'style' of working interactively within the context of the whole ecology. Situational analysis is respectful of participants, promoting ways of working with others that are least-intrusive in their lives, and enabling a broad range of applicable knowledge to inform analyses of situations. Proficient practitioners extend exploration of issues to areas about which there is evidence of relevance, intervening in ways that are least likely to disrupt the supportive aspects of situations. The 'style' reflects the theoretical base of situational analysis. It requires that practice is always ecological, collaborative and evidence-based and that interventions are constructed on supportive foundations.

The application of situational analysis requires a strong background of applicable professional knowledge. As the content of the framework is not prescriptive, use of situational analysis requires sound professional judgement, well informed by theory and sufficient supervised experience to ensure psychologists can draw on applicable aspects of a wide range of knowledge concurrently.

This section presents an overview of the situational analysis, reduced to its basic components for the purpose of making the entire process visible at one time. Application of the situational analysis is not such a straightforward matter and requires the development of not only the explicit knowledge of the profession, but the development of more tacit understandings that support the transfer of this knowledge from its theoretical state to practice. Acquisition of the situational analysis typically follows a developmental path. New and experienced psychologists gather and integrate the explicit and implicit knowledge acquired in study and situated experience through their continuing interaction with others in their professional communities of practice (Annan, 2004). The entirety of the situational analysis is, therefore, far greater than the sum of its visible parts.

Figure 1 illustrates how information is channelled through the problem-solving process. The application of situational analysis is cyclic rather than linear, with cycles recommencing as new information emerges. The process involves identifying the main factors, dimensions, that interact to support or mitigate against the referral issue. Once determined, these dimensions are considered at each step of the situational analysis. Psychologists' work may be completed in one cycle of situational analysis or may go through several iterations. In situations where students with high need require on-going support in changing circumstances, situational analysis is continually adjusted to ensure access to the support they require.

Receive referral

Referrals are made by school staff, parents and other interested parties to practitioners/agencies/teams through the various systems implemented by educational institutions and agencies.

Some referrals are well focused from the outset, outlining specific issues or problematic situations. However, this is rarely the case. Those who request assistance are frequently in overwhelming situations, making the foreground factors difficult to discern. Referrals are, therefore, often vague and refer to events that are difficult to illustrate or describe. In the main, while ecological-oriented psychologists consider the broad context of situations, referrals continue to be made for specific students.

Clarify referral

The focus of the casework or project is determined by psychologists in negotiation with people involved in the referral situation.

Before proceeding with the project, the referral issue must be clarified in negotiation with the referrer and others involved in the situation. The specific focus of the work is determined through a process

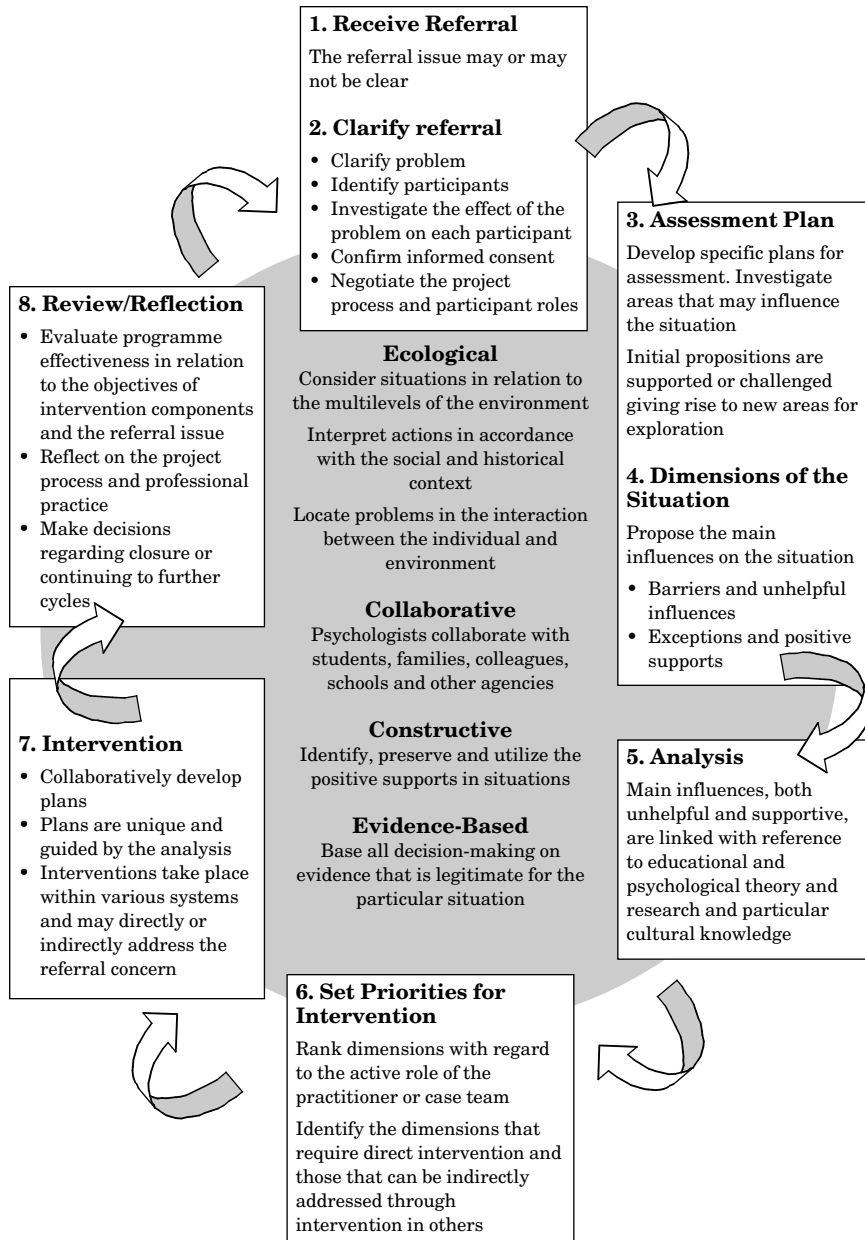


Figure 1 *Situational analysis*

that supports the referrer to prioritize concerns or to determine the central issues in the situation. This process may take some time and may involve interviews, discussion, record review and observation. Data gathered during this early phase simultaneously focuses the project and contributes to the overall assessment process. The criteria for determining the duration of the involvement of the psychologist is set to avoid misunderstanding by any party. Although parental or guardian consent is required before referrals can be made on students' behalf, confirmation is sought at this stage. It is only with knowledge of intended procedures that those acting for students are able to give fully informed consent for the fieldwork to continue.

The problem-solving method is shared and negotiated with participants so that adjustments and specific arrangements can be made, events predicted and decisions made about the respective roles of participants. Psychologists work to construct mutual or shared understanding of the referral issue by examining the effect of the situation on each participant. Acknowledgement of the diverse effects on participants is an important step in a process that considers and influences the ecology surrounding the referral situation. Psychologists attempt to involve all significant people in the situation, irrespective of culture and social circumstance.

Assessment plans

Psychologists work with other participants to make assessment plans, designed to explore issues related to focused referral issues. Plans are unique to the particular situations and are informed by legitimate evidence derived from the practitioners' professional knowledge and the socio-cultural knowledge shared by participants. The initial plan represents a set of propositions about the influences on the situation. The investigation of these possible influences results in information that either supports or challenges the propositions and may generate new avenues of inquiry.

By the time the referral is received, negotiated and clarified, psychologists have collected much information regarding the situation. In most cases, there is sufficient information to generate some focused questions to guide the assessment process. Assessment plans are designed specifically for referral situations and psychologists must draw on professional knowledge to determine the aspects of the situation to be assessed and the procedures for examining these. While psychologists bring particular professional knowledge to this situation, the process is collaboratively determined with all of those involved. The information is collected from a variety of sources, preferably independent, over some period of time and in different settings (Denzin, 1978). Assessment is conducted through the testing of a series of propositions

about possible influences at the various levels of the broad ecology of the particular situation. Propositions about possible influences relate to imbalances between selected aspects of a dynamic ecology, rather than deficits of individuals within the systems.

Dimensions of the situation

Dimensions of the referral situation are the propositions that are supported by assessment data. There can be any number of dimensions but, as situational analysis functions to create a more manageable meaning for experienced events, they are represented in ways that allow ease of access to an overview of the situation. Dimensions include a range of aspects including both supportive and problematic factors.

In most circumstances, requests for psychologist support come from those who are experiencing the referral situations as overwhelming and where people find difficulty making distinctions between foreground and background factors. Situational analysis supports those involved in such situations through ecological exploration of the referral situation resulting in the collaborative identification of main issues. Supportive aspects of the multiple layers of the referral situations are noted along with the constraining factors identified. Dimensions are presented in ways that represent the views of multiple participants and place problematic issues within the interaction between people and their world. Psychologists must attempt to take near-impartial positions in relation to the perspectives of other participants while acknowledging the inevitable effect of their presence in the environment.

Analysis

The analysis is the heart of situational analysis. It is created by proposing links between the dimensions to indicate the influence of one on the other. The links indicate propositions of circular causation rather than isolation of independent variables. This process takes into account the interdependence of individuals and social systems of the environment.

The links between dimensions are made with reference to knowledge derived from theory, research and applicable bodies of socio-cultural knowledge. This interpretation is the pivotal section of the process and demands strong and explicit evidence. Although the situations are dynamic in nature, the analysis requires practitioners to take snapshots in time, taking into account the information collected to a designated point. The analysis represents a strengthened and multi-faceted proposition of the relationships between observed factors and guides the development of the intervention.

Set priorities for intervention

The dimensions are ranked with regard to the extent to which the practitioner or case team takes an active role in the design and implementation of components of the intervention to address the referral issue. At this point, dimensions may be specifically targeted, particularly if there is an indication that other dimensions may be indirectly addressed through intervention in one area.

In the main, the number of dimensions selected for intervention reflects the least-intrusive intervention. Interventions must be manageable to be implemented and sustained by students, parents and teachers. They must also not be so disruptive that they destroy the positive supports already operating within the situation. Psychologists use situational analysis to determine which changes are likely to have the greatest effect and which build on the helpful aspects of the situation. The selection of dimensions for intervention is analogous with determining the critical movement to free a log jam. On some occasions, however, the nature of the situation or the relationships between dimensions may not be completely understood at the end of the first cycle of the process and intervention may require that all dimensions be directly addressed. A rationale is provided for the inclusion or exclusion of each dimension for intervention and the manner in which it might usefully be addressed.

Intervention

Project teams make plans to address the prioritized dimensions through the construction of new solutions. These plans are guided strictly by the analysis of the situation. Objectives are set and procedures clearly and succinctly planned, prepared and documented. The outcome measures that will eventually demonstrate the effectiveness or extent to which the objectives are met, are determined at this time. The roles of active participants in the intervention are noted and plans are set for review.

As at all stages of situational analysis, the planning of interventions is collaborative. Those with a particular interest in the referral situation share in the decision-making regarding procedures for intervention. They are guided by the analysis that identifies the points at which the least-intrusive interventions can be implemented. By determining relationships between the dimensions, the possibility is strengthened that good outcomes can be achieved by making minimal but powerful changes to the environment. When viewed in comparison to 'cover all the bases' interventions that address each dimension, these targeted interventions minimize the chances of disrupting supportive aspects of situations, encourage the engagement of those who work in the referral situations in implementation of the interventions and

foster local ownership of the solutions. Evidence-based interventions are produced as they are based on sound evidence supported analyses, collaboratively designed to take into account professional knowledge and local cultural understandings. It is the analysis that justifies the conduct of those who carry out interventions. Outcome measures access both objective and subjective information depending on the issue being addressed. Where possible, the outcome measures are made explicit and illustrated with reference to specified events and settings.

Review / reflection

The intervention is evaluated by participants using the pre-determined outcome measures. New information accessed during assessment is added to subsequent analyses and decisions are made regarding whether or not a further cycle of situational analysis is required.

Although proficient psychologists continually review, evaluate and modify their actions as they occur, the end of the situational analysis cycle is a time for deliberate reflection. This reflection may involve dialogue between collaborative team members who evaluate the outcomes and the quality of the field practice.

Documentation of situational analysis

Situational analysis is a tool or conceptual framework rather than a reporting process. It is the process by which a team of people with a special interest in a particular circumstance share in the construction of manageable meaning for that situation. The way in which the information is recorded is the concern of individual practitioners, their professional bodies and their employing organizations. Documentation of analyses may range from reports for distribution to participants to graphic tools used by psychologists for their own analysis in the course of their everyday work. Situational analyses are largely co-constructed and therefore are preferably shared with all participants. However, in practice, issues of confidentiality and sensitivity often mitigate against such procedures. Psychologists must be sufficiently informed regarding legal, ethical and professional matters in order to make sound judgments regarding the extent to which the information they report is legal, fair and constructive. Particular skill in report writing is necessary to ensure that reports for distribution meet these criteria while remaining authentic and supported by the analysis of the situation. The reporting of psychologists' casework and projects requires not only technical knowledge and skill but also well developed interpersonal understandings. The focus of reports rests on various features of the situation in question depending on the purpose of the report and the intended audience.

Summary

This article has discussed the theoretical foundations of situational analysis and has outlined the problem-solving method used to generate understanding and intervention in referral situations and research. Situational analysis is a framework for professional practice in educational psychology that involves a particular style of research and practice that is ecological, collaborative, evidence-based and constructive. This approach to addressing issues presenting in educational environments locates issues of concern in the interaction between people and the multi-systems of their world rather than in individuals. Situational analysis involves evidence-based practice that is responsive to the specific environments in which people learn and takes into account the individual subjective views of all of those whose lives affect, and are affected by, referral situations. The process involves the identification and preservation of positive supports in referral situations and requires that situationally-specific interventions be developed on these positive foundations. The open framework does not limit the nature and methods of data collection thus supporting psychologists to work with diverse groups of people. Practitioners must bring to their work extensive knowledge in education and psychology in order to develop assessment plans, interpret findings and design applicable interventions.

Situational analysis is designed to support educational psychologists to work collaboratively within the broad multi-systemed environments of the situations they encounter in their practice. The framework for professional practice provides a sense of direction for the psychologists in their fieldwork and helps all other participants to predict schedules of events and procedures in casework and projects. It supports psychologists to work systematically with other field participants in ways that accommodate their various perspectives and their familiar ways of working. As all decision-making by psychologists using situational analysis must be based on legitimate professional and cultural knowledge, engagement in situational analysis implies that psychologists are carrying out evidence-based practice on a continuous basis.

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